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Alcopop tax fails to curb teenage drinkers

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THE contentious tax on alcopops has failed to influence teenage drinkers and done nothing to curb binge drinking, according to the first survey of underage alcohol use since the federal government introduced the excise hike.

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A Victorian government three-yearly survey of high school students shows the tax faltered on two fronts: pre-mixed sugary alcoholic drinks have become even more popular among the young, and the tax's main targets, teenage girls, increased their risky drinking, with one public health expert describing the female drinking trend as "an absolute disaster".

In May, official data showed a big post-tax decline in alcopops, prompting speculation that young people might be replacing premixed drinks with other alcohol. But, for the first time, the Victorian schools survey found evidence that underage drinkers have stuck with alcopops - partly because the tax fails to influence parents, the main source of teenagers' alcohol.

The Health Department's 2008 survey, which asked 4224 private, Catholic and government school students about their alcohol use, found risky underage drinking continued unabated. But it did reveal some significant changes. The overall number of teenagers drinking alcohol turned sharply downwards.

The department was so surprised by this result it requested the authors, the Cancer Council Victoria, to recheck the figures.

The number of 12 to 15-year-old "current drinkers" - students who drank alcohol in the seven days before the survey - had dropped from 23 per cent in 2005 to 16 per cent in 2008, the lowest level since the survey began in 1984. The number of 16 and 17-year-old current drinkers was at a two-decade low: 44 per cent of boys and 36 per cent of girls in this age group. But the survey found levels of risky drinking and teenage preferences for alcopops unmoved by the new tax.

"This finding suggests that the tax increase has had little impact on current drinkers' alcohol preferences," the report said. "In addition, as there was also no change in preferences for beers or spirits, the data also suggests that the tax increase did not cause students to switch their beverage preferences.

"As parents were the primary source of alcohol among current drinkers, their ongoing preference for premixed spirits may not be surprising, as it is likely that these beverages are affordable to most parents, even after the tax increase," the report said, adding that the continued popularity of sweetened alcoholic drinks "remains a concern".

The alcohol industry, which ran a bitterly fought campaign against the alcopops tax, has claimed the report as evidence of another Rudd government policy failure.

Stephen Riden, spokesman for the Distilled Spirits Industry Council of Australia, said: "I think it's clear from this independent study that the tax has not shifted school students away from [these drinks] and if that was the purpose of the tax it has failed."

But federal Health Minister Nicola Roxon pointed to the report's finding that, overall, there are fewer Victorian secondary students drinking. "The government is determined to keep tackling the risks of dangerous alcohol consumption and tobacco," she said.

The survey report, called *Victorian Secondary School Students' Use of Licit and Illicit Substances in 2008*, was only recently released but the research was conducted in the second half of 2008. It was the first survey of underage drinking following the tax hike of April that year. The hike increased the retail price of premixed spirits by an average of 25 per cent. The 2008 results show that 43 per cent of students aged 12 to 17 nominated premixed spirits as the most common drink they consumed. This was up from 39 per cent in 2005.

But the figures show 70 per cent of 17-year-old girls were choosing alcopops in 2008, up from 64 per cent in 2005. Boys aged 17 also increased their use of alcopops, but most still preferred beer or spirits.

The survey showed that boys of almost all ages were reducing their risky drinking - defined in the survey as consuming seven or more alcoholic drinks on any one day in the previous week.

In 2005, 49 per cent of 17-year-old male drinkers were at risk of short-term harm from their alcohol use; by 2008 that had dropped to 46 per cent. But 17-year-old girls who drink did the reverse and have overtaken boys as binge consumers.

In 2008, 48 per cent of 17-year-olds girls currently drinking were consuming at levels that risked short-term harm, up from 44 per cent in 2005. This is in line with a rising number of studies that show a worrying drinking culture among teenage girls. The Rudd government cited the preference for alcopops among female teenagers as a reason for the tax rise.

"These figures are an absolute disaster," said Professor John Toumbourou, who holds the chair in health psychology at Deakin University, commenting on girls' risky drinking.

Alcohol had a bigger physical impact on girls, he said, but they were not heeding the message.

This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/alcopop-tax-fails-to-curb-teenage-drinkers-20100925-15rnz.html>